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ABSTRACT

This handbook provides an introduction for teacher aides recently hired by the Nassau Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) to work with handicapped students. Topics covered include mental, learning, physical and emotional disabilities, the role of the teacher aide, crisis intervention, building students' self-esteem, managing student behavior, showing approval, and accidents and injuries. A section on special problems covers lifting, helping wheelchair-bound students, and feeding physically handicapped students. A brief concluding section called "Best Advice" presents guidelines for effective behavior management and general rules of thumb from veteran teacher aides. (PB)

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Information Handbook

for Teacher Aides

Developed by

The Board of Cooperative Educational Services
of Nassau County

Division of Special Education

through a grant from

The New York State Department of Labor
Hazard Abatement Board
Occupational Safety and Health Training and Education Program

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Catherine S. Pucciarelli
Editor

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Information Handbook

for Teacher Aides

The Board of Cooperative Educational Services
of Nassau CountyDivision of Special Educationthrough a grant

Division of Special Education

Welcome ...

Now that you have accepted a job as a teacher aide, you will be working for the Division of Special Education of the Board of Cooperative Educational Services of Nassau County. We are delighted that you have decided to become a member of the Nassau BOCES educational team.

About Your Job...

A teacher aide has been described as a paraprofessional who assists the teacher by preparing materials and working with an individual student or with small groups of students on specific tasks. Your teacher will decide what those tasks are. A teacher aide can be of invaluable assistance in helping provide an individualized education program for a handicapped child. You can see that you are an important member of the team.

What's Nassau BOCES?

Nassau BOCES is the largest of the 42 BOCES that exist in New York State. It was founded in 1967 to provide educational and other services for the 56 local school districts in Nassau County. These services could not be provided as economically and efficiently by each school district. One of the services that BOCES provides is special education.

Information That You Should Know About Special Education

The Nassau BOCES Division of Special Education provides educational programs for approximately 1,800 students who have special needs. They come from the 56 school districts to centers located in various school buildings throughout Nassau County.

Before a student can enter a BOCES program, he or she must be identified as handicapped by the local district's committee on special education, and that committee must also decide that the student needs a special school.

Handicaps can be academic, such as learning disabilities; physical, such as cerebral palsy; or psychological, such as emotional disabilities. Once a student is identified as handicapped, he or she is eligible for special education services. At BOCES, these services are provided in special schools. You will be working at one of these special schools.

Services provided at your school and, indeed, at all the BOCES schools include an individualized program of special instruction that helps each student achieve his or her greatest potential.

The BOCES programs provide academics or preacademics, vocational or occupational training, physical education, music, speech, occupational and physical therapies, and psychological counseling depending upon the abilities and the needs of the students.

Additional individualized instruction is provided in most programs through the use of computers in the Learning Centers. Some students learn what are called daily-living skills and most students take part in community-based experiences. You may be involved with your students in many of these activities.

Some of the Handicaps of Students With Special Needs

There are many different types of handicaps. Often a student will have more than one handicapping condition. It is a good idea for a teacher aide who is working with special children to know something about these different handicaps.

Some handicaps will be briefly described here, but no matter what the handicaps are of the students in your program, you will always find teachers and administrators available to tell you what you need to know about them to help you work with the students in your classroom.

Mental Handicaps

Students with mental handicaps used to be called mentally retarded. This was before educators learned how much they could do despite their limitations.

Basically, these students can not "process information" as fast as other children their age. They do not generalize information. Their intelligence scores are low, and many times their behavior is inappropriate because they tend to act much younger than they are.

Students who are mentally handicapped have a wide range of feelings and emotions. It is good to know that they are more like their non-handicapped peers than they are unlike them.

When working with students with mental handicaps, it is good to keep these ideas in mind:

- Decide on realistic goals that the student can achieve.
- Develop tasks that mean something to the student personally.
- Ask the student to perform the tasks starting with the easiest and progressing to the harder ones.
- Give the student reasons to perform well, such as praise and rewards.

- Pay close attention to the student's responses.
- Encourage the student to participate in many different activities.

Learning Disabilities

Students with learning disabilities may be of average or above-average intelligence and yet they do not perform well in school. Often, they do not have the academic, motor, or social skills that they should have.

Learning-disabled students often have behavior problems that may be connected to their learning problems. They may not be able to concentrate or to focus on a task in the classroom. They may be easily distracted or may speak out at the wrong time.

If you are working with students with learning disabilities you should keep the following ideas in mind:

- Provide structure in the classroom with clearly defined rules and expectations.
- Help the students to succeed in what they are doing.
- Minimize their failures.
- Give students immediate feedback in specific situations.
- Let the students practice their skills with a wide variety of materials.

Physical Disabilities

Students with physical disabilities have handicaps that affect their mobility. They may also have other problems such as mental handicaps. However, some students who are physically disabled have average or above-average intelligence.

It is important to note that when you are working with students with physical disabilities you will be given training in such things as safe ways to lift, position, and feed them This information is important for your safety as well as the student's.

You should also consider the following ideas:

- Work with each student according to his or her abilities.
- Ask the staff what adaptations, special equipment, or procedures are necessary for the student.
- Ask the student which adaptations are most comfortable for him or her.
- Find out what safety precautions are necessary for each student.
- Let the student be involved in everyday activities.
- Use good sense but don't overprotect students.
- Allow students to assume responsibility for themselves.

Emotional Disabilities

Students with emotional disabilities are not able to control their emotions and, therefore, have difficulty in getting along with their teachers and the other students. These students also have learning problems. They may be immature, shy, and withdrawn. Or they may be acting out, hostile, and aggressive.

Although many of the disabilities that have been discussed have behavior problems associated with them, students who are emotionally disabled have more severe behavior problems.

When working with these students, it is good to keep these ideas in mind:

- Provide a structured environment.
- Let the students know what is expected of them.

- Reinforce behavior that is appropriate with praise or reward.
- Reinforce students' attempts to behave properly.
- Be fair and consistent.
- Try to understand the frustrations, hopes, and fears of your students.

Other Disabililities

These are only four of the disabilities of special education students. There are many others including hearing impairment and vision impairment. If you are working with students who have these handicaps, your teacher and administrator will give you some specific ideas that will help you do your job well.

In fact, all of the suggestions that have been included for the different groups of students are good to remember when working with any special needs students. They will help you do a good job in a safe and wholesome environment.

Before You Come to Work

There are some things that you should keep in mind before you come to school for your work day. Two good rules are

Be Prepared - Dress Appropriately

Things you shouldn't wear

- skirts, slacks, or shirts that are tight
- high heels, open sandals, or shoes that hurt your feet
- earrings that hang down and rings with sharp settings
- scarves or necklaces

What to wear

- comfortable clothing that allows you to sit, stand, or move freely
- low heels or flat shoes, sneakers

If your hair is long, it can be pulled back or braided. If you have a beard, it should be cut close to the face.

Leave Your Cares At Home

Sometimes it's really hard to leave personal situations behind you when you come to work. However, you need to concentrate on the activities that take place in your classroom to be an effective teacher aide. Try to leave the cares of your everyday life outside the classroom. Learn to manage your own tension -- especially on a "tough day".

Feel good about yourself and the job you are doing and it will help you do a better job with your students.

Now You're On the Job

Once you join the staff of a Nassau BOCES special education program you become a member of an educational team. You work directly with a classroom teacher but from time to time, you will also meet with the administrator, therapists, psychologists, social workers, and, of course, other teacher aides.

A Member of the Team -- You are an important part of the team, and you should always feel that you can ask questions or seek help from any member of that team.

You should understand your role as a teacher aide. You know that you will be assisting a teacher, but you should clarify just how your teacher and administrator see your role. You should know what positive intervention strategies are used by your school and your teacher.

Knowing the Students -- When you are assigned to a classroom, you should learn about the disabilities of your students and something of their background. Knowing about the past performance of special needs students is most important. This knowledge will help you be a better aide and will insure that your classroom is a safe and nurturing place.

Confidentiality -- As a team member you will learn information about your students that is "privileged and confidential." This information is given to you so that you can help your students. It should not be shared with others except in a professional way when the educational team is meeting or when you are conferring with your teacher or administrator. The information should never be shared by you with anyone, even a professional in your school, outside of designated meetings or conferences.

The Role of the Teacher Aide

Your role as a teacher aide, you now know, is to assist your classroom teacher who will tell you just what is expected of you. When you work with other teachers or school personnel, they will also give you direction. Basically, however, the role of a teacher aide includes such activities as

- supervising an individual student or a small group of students during specific activities while the teacher is present;
- explaining to students such instructional activities as games, learning center work, and computers;
- encouraging students;
- directing students from one activity or location to another;
- observing and recording the performance of students;
- maintaining some records and progress charts

Behavior Management and Consistency - Throughout all these activities you should, whenever necessary, use the same behavior management style that is used by your teacher. It is necessary that you consistently use the same approach that the teacher does.

When there are two adults working with children, especially those with behavior problems, the adults should agree on the methods used, the rules enforced, and the positive or negative consequences that will follow certain behavior.

Throughout all of your work with special students, remember you must be consistent.

Helping Manage Student Behavior

One of the most important jobs that you will do as a teacher aide is to help manage the behavior of students so that each student will succeed in learning and the classroom will run smoothly and safely.

Developing good management skills

Good management of the classroom begins by creating a positive learning environment for the students. Remember, for many studentslearning is a difficult task. It may be associated with failure. Therefore, both you and the teacher must create a positive experience for the student. This will help to stop negative behavior before it occurs.

Some good management skills include

- **Give positive reinforcement when students are good** -- Students who are behaving well should be given what is called positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcers include

  Praise -- When a student is well behaved, he or she should be praised, but praise alone may often not be enough to reinforce good behavior.

  Special activities -- Praise can be coupled with allowing the student to participate in a special activity that he or she likes. This will provide greater reinforcement.

  Tangible rewards -- Rewards (edible such as wholesome snacks or non-edible such as stickers or marks that are symbols of praise) can be given immediately after the student shows the good behavior.

  Token system -- this should be used only with the direction of your classroom teacher.

- **Follow through when you say you're going to do something** -- The students need to know that rules exist for a reason. When they break a rule, they should know that you will follow through with the consequences that have been explained to them. Remember that if you are consistent, your students will be better behaved.

- **Rules can be modified to reduce tension** -- Sometimes your teacher and you will decide that some rules can be changed. This must be explained to the students. It is always helpful if alternatives are discussed with the students.

- **Frequent punishment can have negative effects** -- It is always better to look for positive ways to reinforce good behavior rather than using punishment to stop undesireable behavior.

- **Ignore negative behavior** -- Many students with behavior problems are seeking attention through their negative behavior. If you can ignore this type of behavior, do so. Ignoring, however, should be coupled with all the positive reinforcements previously discussed for good or appropriate behavior.

- **Sometimes you have to move beyond ignoring** -- Some behavior such as fighting or throwing things cannot be ignored. You may have to use some form of discipline. Use discipline wisely, and when the student's behavior changes begin positive reinforcement again. To discipline, you may use

  A soft reprimand -- such as the words, "no," "stop," or "enough," spoken softly to the student so that others will not hear.

  A loud reprimand -- using the same words but loud enough for others to hear them.

  Loss of privileges -- the student loses the chance to earn the

Some other important guidelines that you should follow

Develop good observational skills -- You must be a second set of eyes for the teacher. You must be able "to see" possible warning signs that a student's behavior is becoming difficult. You may see things happening that indicate that a student is losing control or becoming aggressive.

Use language to defuse possible difficult situations -- Remember a softly spoken reprimand can be an effective way of stopping a situation that could become dangerous. Direct confrontation is usually not productive.

Be calm and non-threatening -- The student who is approached by you in the most calm and non-threatening way you can act is more likely to respond to your directions in a positive way.

Know the school day's danger times -- There are certain times of the day especially times of transition when students are leaving one place and going to another when inappropriate behavior is more likely. The best idea is to plan ahead for the difficult times. One of the most difficult times of the day involves the arrival and dismissal of students. With so many of them gathered together, there is always the possibility of confrontation. The teacher aide should be particularly alert at these tiomes of the day.

When to use time-out -- It is important to know how to manage a time-out situation. Time-out should be used as a last resort because it means removing the student from the social setting. It is used when the behavior of the student becomes such that he or she could injure himself or herself or other students. The time-out procedure has to be agreed upon by the building administrator. It should be used with care. Usually when a student is given the time-out discipline, he or she is physically removed from the educational setting and placed in a room where there is no stimulation or reinforcement.

Sometimes You May Need Crisis Intervention

There are always situations that arise where you may need to know the procedures that are part of what is called crisis intervention. Some of the things that you should remember are

- **Be prepared** -- Get to know the behavorial history of each student . If he or she has a history of violent or aggressive behavior, you should find out what procedures were used before with the student and which of these were effective. That doesn't mean that the same procedures will be effective again, but the more you know the better prepared you will be.

- **Discuss student behavior programs with your teacher** -- Meeting with the teacher to discuss these programs will help you know what reinforcers should be used and how frequently they should be given. You'll also learn what behaviors should be ignored and those that need a mild reprimand.

- **Know school policy** -- Find out what the policy of your administration is in regard to fighting, aggressive behavior, and destruction of property, so that you can be consistent.

- **Find out what to do in an emergency** -- Know what the school procedure is for an emergency. Always get help. Never place a student or yourself at-risk in an emergency.

- **Learn to recognize when a crisis is about to happen** -- It is important for you to learn the warning signs that mean a crisis may be developing. Ask your teacher about anything that concerns you. Ask also how to deal with such situations.

- **Keep records on crisis behavior** -- You can learn from the type of behavior that is considered to be either a part of crisis or, something that may lead to a crisis situation. Understanding this type of behavior will help you to recognize possible danger signs in the future. Perhaps you may be able to stop the cycle of behavior that causes dangerous situations before it goes too far. Note in your records the time, date, what preceded the event, the description of the behavior itself, and the consequences.

- **Be sure you know what you are doing** -- When physical aggression towards staff is a concern, learn about ways to deal with it. Remember, you can always get help. Do not try to deal with a difficult situation by yourself.

Building Self-Esteem

Many of the students in special education have problems with self-esteem. Often, this is the result of feeling that they have failed. Part of your job as a teacher aide is to build their self-esteem by helping them to believe in themselves. There are many ways to do this including

- **Listen to what the students are saying** -- Often the students will confide in you, and you will become an important person in their lives. Listen carefully and take their questions or shared confidences seriously. Try to always be positive in your response to them.

- **Don't be judgmental** -- No matter what the issue, you are dealing with the feelings of the student. You shouldn't pass judgment on how a student perceives the problem.

- **Show a genuine interest in each child** -- With some students it will be easy. With others it will be more difficult. Treat each student as an individual. Accept each child no matter what his or her background or personality.

- **Remember what a student tells you** -- This will show the student that you are really interested.

- **Ask if you can help** -- If you think a student has a problem, ask him or her if you can help, but don't force yourself upon or embarrass the student with your concern.

- **Holding a grudge is totally useless** -- Don't let a student believe that you hold a grudge because of past behavior.

- **Praise don't criticize** -- Give the students a lot of sincere praise. Think what you are going to say before you say it. Compliment and encourage the student often but always sincerely.

- **Some nevers** -- Never compare one child to another. Never make fun of a child's efforts. Never offer negative praise such as "You're too smart to do that."

- **Last but not least -- keep your sense of humor.**

Ways of Showing Approval

Throughout this handbook, we have been talking about praise, approval, and the reward system. There are many ways to show approval. You can use

- **Body language** -- Includes such signs of approval as a nod of the head, a warm smile, a thumbs up sign.

- **Words of approval** -- Can include just a single word such as excellent, fantastic, terrific or a sentence such as "You're doing fine," or "I like that."

- **Closeness** -- Being near the students shows approval.

- **Touching** - A pat on the shoulder, for instance, can be an important way of showing a student that he or she is doing the right thing. It is important, however, for a teacher aide to know the history of each student. Some students for various reasons may not like to be touched and you should know this so that you do not cause a negative situation when you are atempting to show approval.

There are other ways of showing approval or of rewarding good behavior. You can allow a student that has earned particular approval to lead the group. You can display the work of the students. You can let students participate in the activities they like the best. As you become more familiar with your duties, you will learn many of the things that will be a normal part of the reward system in your class.

Dealing with Special Problems

If you are a teacher aide who is going to work with physically handicapped children you will receive special training in such areas as lifting and feeding. However, there are some general rules that involve dealing with physical problems that all teacher aides should know. They are principally concerned with lifting and carrying.

Lifting

- **Prepare for the lift** -- Be sure that the person you are going to lift knows what you are going to do. Know how you will lift the person and where you are going with him or her.

- **Know your own strength** -- If you have any doubts about your ability to lift or carry a person or object, ask for help.

- **Do the lift right** -- Bend your knees, not your back, and pick up the person or object.

- **Keep a broad base** -- Keep your feet apart while bending and lifting to give you a broad base of support.

- **Lifting with someone else** -- When lifting with another person, do it smoothly and together. It's a good idea to count "One, two, three, lift."

- **Turning** -- Take small steps to turn and never twist your body when lifting or carrying.

- **Keep what you are carrying in close** -- You should carry everything close to your body rather than reaching out. Also hold what you are carrying high. If you are carrying a young child, carry him or her with head forward so that he or she can see where you are going.

SomeOther Ideas to Keep in Mind

- **When you don't need to lift** -- Push or pull an object instead of lifting it whenever you can.

- **Don't bend over for long periods of time** -- Whenever you can sit on the floor or on a short stool rather than bending over.

- **Keep fit** -- Stay in good physical condition. You should remember to stand and sit up straight.

Helping the child in a wheelchair

If you are working with physically handicapped children, you should know how to position a child in a wheelchair.

- **Lock the wheelchair** -- Then make sure the student is sitting on both buttocks with back and buttocks against the back of the wheelchair.

- **Fasten the seat belt** -- Fasten the belt securely and adjust it so that it is snug but not tight. Then adjust the abductor pummel, the piece that fits between the child's knees and inner thighs.

- **Check on proper positioning** -- Make sure the upper body of the child is aligned between the lateral chest supports if the wheelchair has them. Check the student's feet and make sure they are resting on the foot plate. If there are foot straps, make sure they are tight around the foot. If there is a lap tray, position it on the wheelchair. Check the height of the armrests to make sure they are level.

- **When students are properly positioned** -- Their shoulders should be level and their heads erect. They should be looking forward.

Feeding a student with a physical handicap

- Sit so that you are at eye level with the student's face and mouth.
- Keep alert for any signs of discomfort and chewing or swallowing difficulties that might lead to choking.
- Use a plastic-coated spoon or fork. Never use plastic utensils because they could break in the student's mouth.
- Make sure the student is sitting upright to help with ease of swallowing and digestion. His or her head should also be upright and slightly forward.
- Place soft food in the middle of the student's mouth, gently pressing down to encourage his or her mouth to close. Place solid food at the side of the student's mouth between the back teeth to help biting and chewing.
- Use small amount on the spoon throughout feeding.
- Be generous in the amount of liquids provided for the student.
- Be aware of how the student reacts to the consistencies of different foods.
- Learn the Heimlich maneuver.
- Know how to take the student out of his or her chair in case of an emergency.
- Remember to always get help in an emergency.

Accidents and Injuries

Everything that has been said thus far in this handbook has really been directed at creating a safe environment for the students, for the teacher, and for you, the teacher aide. The prinicipal concern has been how to manage student behavior. One more important step is to make sure that the physical environment of the classroom is safe.

The teacher and you can "child guard or student guard" your room so that it will not be unnecessarily cluttered. The classroom should not contain possible dangerous situations such as partitions that could fall. There should not be things available that can be thrown. This helps to provide the safest environment possible.

Five Good Rules to Remember as You Go to Work

1. **Develop and use non-verbal cues as often as possible.** Such things as clearing your throat (disapproval) or nodding your head (approval) are ways to manage student behavior.

2. **Never do in public what you can handle in private.** Speak to the student alone whenever possible.

3. **Find a good place for yourself in your classroom.** The nearer a student is physically to the authority figure, the better behaved he or she will be.

4. **Find out what words make a situation worse and avoid them.** Avoiding words that build rather than reduce tensions should be a way of keeping difficult situations from becoming worse.

5. **Be specfic about what is misbehavior.** Tell the students what the proper behavior is at the same time that you are telling them that they are misbehaving.

Best Advice

Teacher aides who are currently working with students in Nassau BOCES special education programs were asked what they believed was the best advice that could be given to a new teacher aide. The following comes from their views on what a teacher aide should know and remember on the job.

- Learn to be flexible.
- Treat all students as individuals.
- Be kind and consistent.
- Never back a child into a corner.
- Be a good listener.
- Be prepared for everything and anything.
- Always use good sense and have a good attitude towards your job.
- Tender loving care is more important than rigid discipline.
- If you know a child has a history of being abused, do not touch him or her physically.
- Show the children that you care about them and you will gain their confidence.
- Don't take anything personally.
- Keep your sense of humor and maintain a good perspective on everything.

- Use common sense in all situations.
- Always be yourself and be honest with the students.
- Have as much patience as possible.
- Give the students a lot of encouragement and praise.
- Don't say anything that you are not prepared to follow up.
- Think carefully before you act.
- Keep your eyes and ears open and don't be afraid to report what's happening if you think you should.
- Know where all the students in your class are and what they are doing.
- Try to understand the background of each child. When needed, be compassionate.
- An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.
- Look for the good in each child.
- Keep open good lines of communication with your teacher.
- Remember to call for help when you need it and to answer a call when you can.
- Always ask for help if you are unsure of what you are doing.
- Know as much about a student as you can, particularly if he or she has any health problems.

- Always leave the student a way out of a situation.

- Never embarrass or belittle a student.

- When there's a crisis situation, let one staff member act as the lead in dealing with the student. Other staff should be there for support but never let there be too many bodies or voices dealing directly with the student. It will only escalate the situation.

- When lifting a physically handicapped student, it is good for two aides to lift together.

- Always bend your knees when lifting.

- Never be afraid to ask questions.